

My overarching philosophy of pedagogy and education is that students learn best when they are actively engaged in their own learning process. From my own experience as a student in the public school system, what I remember best are those activities and projects in which I was actively involved, and those teachers who facilitated this experiential learning. I believe that students must be able to see the relevance of subject content in their own daily lives, and it must be presented in a way that is interesting, engaging and appropriate for their age, their level of comprehension, and their individual needs. I also strongly believe in the importance of establishing and maintaining trust and good rapport with my students, as I feel that the student-teacher relationship is a valuable component of students' overall educational experience.

Student Needs

Before learning can truly commence, there are structures that must be in place in the classroom, and there are needs amongst the students that must be addressed. In order that they are able to get the most from their educational opportunities in my classroom, my students' basic physiological needs must firstly be met. I will hence refer to Maslow.

Abraham Maslow's humanistic approach to psychology is significant in the classroom, particularly with regard to his hierarchy of human needs. I truly believe that the most basic and fundamental needs of students must be met in order for them to reach their full learning capacity (Ewen, 1993). If my students have not eaten breakfast in the morning, for example, their essential physiological needs are not being met, which will affect their ability to learn. I have worked at schools that have introduced breakfast programs or toast carts in order to address this issue, and I will certainly support and contribute to the continuation or institution of similar programs in the schools where I will work in the future.

On a similar note, if a child comes from an abusive home, or if a child is a victim of bullying at school, his or her physical and psychological well-being are jeopardized. This will most likely have a negative impact on his or her academic achievements, thus affecting the child's development and inhibiting the self-actualization process. In cases such as these, we as teachers are often among the first to be aware of the particular situation, due to the amount of time that we spend with our students. We must always be cognisant of our moral and professional obligation to them. Whether or not my students will confide in me if they are experiencing such problems will largely depend on the nature of the relationship that I have with

them. In my teaching career, I must always remember the importance of establishing trust, good rapport and open communication with my students, in order to recognize and accommodate their most important and fundamental needs.

With regard to individuals with physical disabilities and exceptionalities, I believe that we should accept and accommodate for them by including them in every facet of mainstream society, including of course the public education system (Hutchinson, 2010). In my classroom, I will be fully prepared and willing to become familiar with my students' individual needs and challenges, and to assist in the development and implementation of specific accommodations. In doing so, I will model the respect and duty of care that the other students will be expected to show, not only toward those students with exceptionalities, but also toward every other student in the classroom.

Similarly, with regard to the cultural diversity that will likely exist in my classroom, I believe that certain accommodations also need to be made for students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It can be advantageous to the learning process of these students if they are able to maintain those elements of their culture and language with which they identify most strongly (Nieto, 1999). One of the challenges for me as a teacher in this instance is to accommodate for them in a way that does not exclude them from the other members of the class, particularly when those accommodations involve specifics regarding language, dress, group participation and relations with other students.

Getting to know my students as individuals, in order to recognize and accommodate for their particular needs, is one of my primary goals as a teacher. It is only when these needs are met that my students will be capable of learning at their full potential.

Student Learning

The theoretical perspective I will primarily draw on in my pedagogical practice is constructivism, as I feel that this is the epistemology that best aligns with my own personal philosophy of teaching and learning.

I believe firmly in many of the principles of constructivism, which gives emphasis to the individual construction of knowledge on the part of the learner, rather than the transmission of

knowledge from teacher to learner (Applefield, 2001). This is the theory of education that I personally find most accurate, relevant and applicable in the classroom.

Although Piaget is the father of constructivism, I do not necessarily agree with the age ranges at which he claims the stages of development take place (Piaget and Inhelder, 1962), and I feel that it is erroneous to make sweeping generalizations about the development of children in particular age groups as a whole. I do, however, see the value of recognizing the various transitions that children go through as they mature. I feel that growth and development are an individual process for each child, and that this process varies substantially from one child to the next, depending on a variety of both genetics and external factors.

In my opinion, Vygotsky's theories of zone of proximal development and scaffolding are very relevant and practical in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978). By providing my students with educational experiences that are within their zone of proximal development, I can ideally support and encourage their individual progression and styles of learning. In keeping with these theories, I must facilitate my students' education by drawing on their prior knowledge and supplementing it with information, experiences and activities that will be memorable and will challenge them and help them to further their own learning.

In my own experience, both in public school and during my undergraduate degree, the "chalk and talk" method of lecturing was always very prevalent. As I was diligent in taking notes and studying, I generally performed well on tests, and I never questioned this pedagogical method. In looking back, however, I realize that I now remember very little of what I studied during my school years. I do not want my students to have a similar experience. I wish to make the educational experiences of my students both relevant and memorable. Bearing this in mind, I must help my students develop an attitude toward learning and inquiry, so that they can expand on what they already know and take initiative in their own education.

This concept relates closely to the theories of Bruner, in that the understanding of fundamental principles provides a model for understanding similar concepts, thereby discrediting the widely-held belief that knowledge must be imparted upon children by adults (Bruner, 1996). This implies that learning is an active process, and that learners construct new ideas based on current knowledge and past experiences. This changes a teacher's role, as it emphasises not

instruction, but rather facilitation. As a teacher, I therefore need to find a suitable balance between these two roles of instructor and facilitator.

Paulo Freire offers suggestions for the reconciliation of these roles by proposing the teacher-student and student-teacher model, whereby the teacher learns from the students (Freire, 1970). If we are to truly allow students to take responsibility for their own learning, we must be willing at times to allow them to take on the role of instructor and facilitator, in order to present their knowledge to their fellow students, to demonstrate their learning through presentations and interactive activities, and to facilitate class discussion. We as teachers have much to learn from the various experiences and viewpoints of our students.

Student Motivation

Regarding the use of punishment and rewards in the classroom, I agree with Kohn that there is potential for this system to warp the relationship between teacher and students, as it changes the nature of the relationship itself. Whereas prior to the reward/punishment system the relationship is based on equity and collaboration, it becomes one where the teacher is the imparter and the student is the receiver. The student must therefore seek approval in order to receive a reward or avoid punishment (Kohn, 1993). I feel that if rewards are to be used it must be done so cautiously and appropriately, as they can potentially undermine the value of an educational task. Striving toward what they look forward to at the end can cause students to hurry through tasks unnecessarily, potentially taking the focus away from the learning experience itself, and jeopardizing the quality of the learning in which the students are taking part (Langer, 1997).

Additionally, I have witnessed physical punishment as a deterrent for “bad” or undesirable behaviour, and I strongly and adamantly disagree with this principle. When travelling and teaching in other parts of the world, one must be very certain of one’s own morals and values. Although corporal punishment is still practiced in the school systems of a number of countries, the implementation of a code of behaviour is a question of classroom management technique and personal beliefs. Even in cases where it is the accepted societal norm, I would not implement or condone the use of physical force or intimidation to keep student behaviour in line. I realize that order must be maintained in the classroom, and I believe that setting very clear

guidelines for expected behaviour, outlining clear consequences, and being consistent in applying them will address and reduce the frequency of misbehaviour in the classroom.

With regard to positive motivational strategies, I will utilize the theory of self-determination in my classroom in order to increase student motivation. According to self-determination theory, motivation relies on feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The higher the degree to which students feel they are successful in their school work, feel they are engaging by choice rather than against their will, and feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, the more likely they are to be intrinsically motivated to complete their school work. Helping students to develop such self-determination may seem like a challenging task, but I believe that it will largely depend on how successful I am at establishing inclusion in my classroom, providing differentiated project options, and getting to know my students on an individual basis.

I recognize that, with time and experience, I will discover further theories that I find relevant and beneficial to my teaching practice. With changes in the education system and the advancement of modern educational technologies in the current century, my role as a teacher will likely change dramatically throughout the course of my career. In order to stay current and relevant, I must be able to adapt to such changes. What must not change, however, is my commitment to the educational needs of my students and my belief in their value and potential as individuals.

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